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PREP FOOTBALL

First day of hitting 'just like Christmas'

Energy unleashed as Livonia Stevenson gridders finally get to go full throttle

Tim Smith
hometownlife.com

There's nothing that football players such as Gio Agazzi look forward to more than the first practice of the season when they can hit with full pads.

Agazzi, a 6-4, 285-pound lineman entering his senior year at Livonia Stevenson, took a swig of water during Friday

afternoon's practice and then flashed a smile.

"It's just like Christmas, it happens once a year," said Agazzi, who plays tackle on both sides of the line of scrimmage. "It's going to be the last time for me. I will be playing college football, hopefully, somewhere. I'll have this chance again."

"But a lot of these kids I don't think will ever get to have this day back. It's going to be something you remember forever, tell your kids and all that other good stuff."

Also thrilled to be on the hot, turf field for the first day of all-out hitting was Stevenson outside linebacker Collin Bo-

wersox, also going into his senior year.

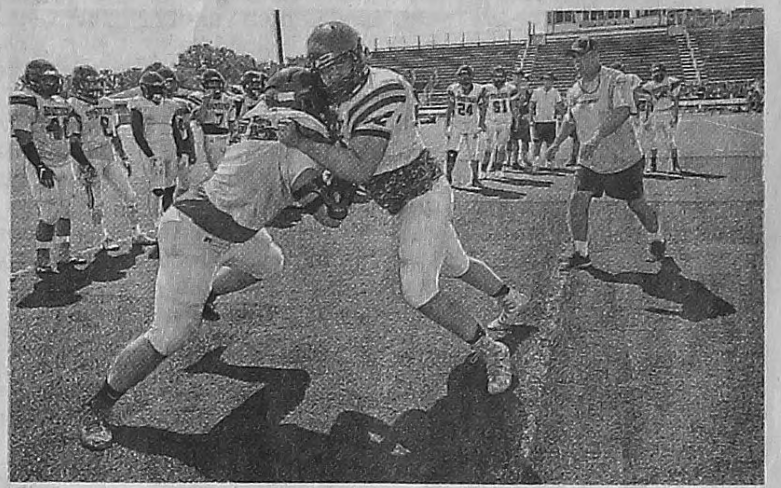
"We're all excited, we're all pumped, I'm not going to lie," Bowersox said. "Our defense is looking a lot better than last year and we're all getting really excited for the season to come around."

"We're just working on shedding blocks, working on all the techniques that we've practiced during the year and just putting it all in with pads now."

Let's go

That Christmas morning feeling of anticipation is some-

See STEVENSON, Page B3



First day of hitting at Livonia Stevenson. Spartans Giovanni Agazzi and Brendan Plue compete.

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COLLEGE BASEBALL

IT'S ALL GOLDEN



Schoolcraft College Gold Glove winner Jared Merandi demonstrates proper technique for catching a throw.

BILL BRESLER | HOMETOWNLIFE.COM

Merandi grabs first Gold Glove in Schoolcraft program's young history

Tim Smith
hometownlife.com

Every day throughout the baseball season, Jared Merandi brought his glove, bat and proverbial lunch bucket to go to work. His job was to be quicker and more assertive tracking fly balls in center field for the Schoolcraft Ocelots.

Practice does makes perfect, especially for 20-year-old Merandi, a flawless defender in 2017 with zero errors next to his name.

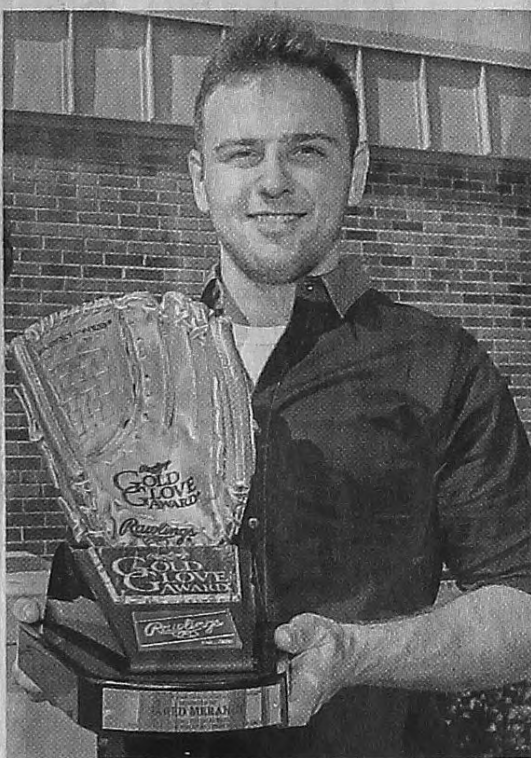
And perfection proved golden for the Plymouth High School alum and Canton resident, who Friday received a National Junior College Athlet-

ic Association Division III Rawlings Gold Glove — the first national honor for the second-year Schoolcraft program.

"Coming here and picking it up, it was awesome," said Merandi, who knew about the award in July. "At first I was, like, 'Sweet, it's a cool award.' But actually coming here and it was right in front of me I was, like, 'All right, this is pretty sweet. It's special.'"

"I wished regionals would have ended a little differently so that the whole team could have gotten some hardware. That would have been really cool. But being able to get

See MERANDI, Page B2



BILL BRESLER | HOMETOWNLIFE.COM
Jared Merandi proudly accepts the Rawlings Gold Glove trophy for his fielding prowess with the Schoolcraft College Ocelots.

PREP FOOTBALL

'Darko' is the straw that stirs CC's drink this year

Brad Emons
hometownlife.com

When he's on the football field, Isaac Darkangelo likes to take the Theodore Roosevelt approach.

The 6-foot-1, 228-pound senior's policy on the gridiron is to "speak softly and carry a big stick."

Darkangelo, a third-year varsity player, can be presidential and diplomatic-like off the field, but once he's inside those white lines, he can lay the lumber, as evidenced by leading the Shamrocks last season in tackles with 144, including 43 solo (plus a sack and one interception).

"He has great leadership qualities," first-year CC coach Dan Anderson said. "He's not always the most vocal guy, but he just works. He's just a workhorse and people follow his lead."

The linebacker and running back, who helped Novi Detroit Catholic Central to a 13-1 record and a run to last year's MHSAA Division 1 state final, is a throwback.

"Isaac is an old school linebacker," Anderson said. "He loves to run downhill and he loves contact. He has great footwork and good speed, too."

Expectations remain high for the Shamrocks heading into their season opener at 7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 25, at home against Sterling Heights

See 'DARKO', Page B3



Darkangelo

PREP ATHLETICS

Fordson, Dearborn to become KLAA members next year

League will grow to 16 schools in 2018-19

Brad Emons
hometownlife.com

The Kensington Lakes Activities Association is entering a new phase once again.

After shrinking from 24 to 14 schools for the 2017-18 school year, the KLAA an-

nounced that Dearborn High and Dearborn Fordson have accepted invitations after being members of the Western Wayne Athletic Conference.

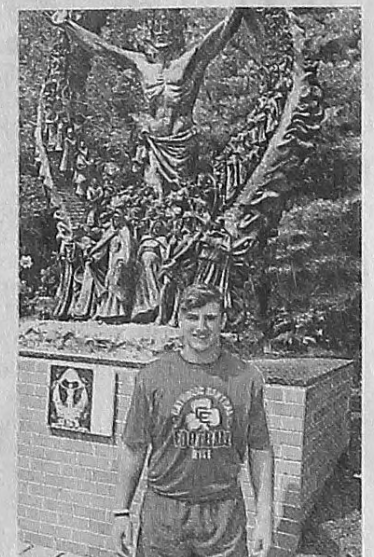
In 2018-19, three WWAC schools will be leaving for the KLAA: Belleville, which was voted in last spring (to replace Grand Blanc), along with the two Dearborn schools.

The three are expected to link up in an eight-school divi-

sion based geographically along with Livonia Churchill, Livonia Franklin, Livonia Stevenson, Wayne Memorial and Westland John Glenn. It will be called the Black Division.

The other eight-team division, which will be called the Gold, will feature current KLAA members Novi, Northville, Canton, Salem, Plymouth,

See KLAA, Page B2



BRAD EMONS

Senior linebacker Isaac Darkangelo stands in front of the One Body sculpture on Detroit Catholic Central's campus.

Balconi tourney gets season rolling

Eight of state's top teams to compete

Tim Smith
hometownlife.com

August doesn't just mean the return of football. Soccer is back on the horizon, too.

For starters, there is Saturday's Gary Balconi Varsity Soccer Tournament at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park.

Taking part in this year's tourney, which begins 10 a.m. at four fields on campus, are Canton, Plymouth, Salem,

Novi Detroit Catholic Central, Walled Lake Northern, Rochester Adams, Saline and Utica Eisenhower.

"The Balconi Tournament includes some of the best teams in the state year in and year out," said Canton varsity boys soccer coach Mark Zemanski, whose team is a perennial powerhouse. "The great competition it provides helps us assess our teams strengths and weaknesses at a very early stage in the season.

"This helps us to focus on improving our team play for the season."

Teams will be competing at the P-CEP Varsity Soccer Stadium (where the championship game will take place at 3 p.m.), as well as the varsity turf, freshman soccer and baseball fields.

Opening games are as follows: Canton vs. Northern, varsity soccer field; Plymouth vs. Adams, turf field; Salem vs. Eisenhower, freshman field; Catholic Central vs. Saline, baseball field.

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AMY MCGRATH
Canton celebrates winning the 2016 Gary Balconi Soccer Tournament. This year's tourney begins at 10 a.m. Saturday at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park. Eight teams will compete on four fields.

MERANDI

Continued from Page B1

something nationally, it's awesome."

Merandi also got it done at the plate, batting .355 with two homers and 19 RBIs.

Sharing the moment

On hand Friday at Schoolcraft College's physical education building were Ocelots head coach Rob Fay and another standout outfielder from the 2017 squad, Waymond Lemon.

"It's amazing; probably I should have worked on my defense more," Lemon said with a grin. "I could have got

one."

Both Merandi and Lemon (a .340 hitter with just three errors in 2017) concluded their second seasons with the program, with Merandi considering Michigan State University for a walk-on opportunity. Lemon will continue his baseball career in 2018 at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

"Me and (Merandi) have been throwing partners for two years," Lemon said. "So just seeing my brother like that, on a huge accomplishment, even for a program that's only been around for two years, is very special."

Merandi said it meant a lot to him to see Lemon there when Fay brought

the shiny gold glove down from the athletic office.

"Yeah, we always played catch," Merandi said. "He was probably one of my closest friends during the school year. We'd always play catch, we'd be in the outfield together, we'd be pitching together.

"It's real nice to see him out here supporting me. Experiencing it with me. It's nice, cool."

Just crazy

After Merandi takes the award home for a while, he will bring it back to Schoolcraft to be on display for future baseball players to catch a glimpse of.

"It sets a standard," said Merandi, who will study business at Michigan State University regardless of whether he wins a spot as a baseball walk-on. "Coming into the season, national awards, I don't think any one of us was thinking

about that. I know I wasn't.

"To win it, it was actually, like, it was crazy. When our coach told us we were nominated, I was thinking, like, we're going up against everyone, all the D-III teams in the nation. I didn't think I had a chance. But when it happened, I was really surprised. So I think it will set a standard and let everyone know that things are attainable."

According to Fay, he and other Schoolcraft coaches nominated Merandi and second baseman Hunter Sellers (Livonia Franklin alum) for the regional Gold Glove team.

Sellers, unfortunately, did not make the all-region squad. But Merandi's name went to the national board composed of officials from Rawlings and the NJCAA, after which one player per position is selected.

"He was error-free in the outfield, so for him it

was real easy," Fay said. "When they decide who wins these awards, they basically look at fielding position, which comes into fielding and throwing.

"And all year long out in center field, he was perfect for us."

On the map

That level of proficiency didn't happen by accident. Fay praised Merandi for his constant inner drive to work and get better with Schoolcraft outfield coach George Kontos.

"We preach here that we play defense with our feet," Fay said. "So the faster, quicker, more agile we can be, the better we are going to be to get to balls.

"We constantly tell our guys to beat balls to spots. If you can beat a ball to the spot and get your body in position, you're not only in position to field it, you're also in position to make the

throw."

And after just two seasons, Schoolcraft's baseball program is on the national map, something that can only help future high school players decide being an Ocelot is a viable option.

"Being a young program, recruits aren't necessarily familiar with our coaches," Fay said. "This award shows that if you're an outfielder, coach Kontos is a great coach for outfielders.

"It shows that we get talented players and it shows that, by coming to Schoolcraft you can get the national recognition that may help you get into the four-year school that you're pursuing."

Who knows whether future Gold Gloves are in the offing for Schoolcraft players? But thanks to Merandi, the possibilities are endless.

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HOW TO BE FLAWLESS

Take it from Jared Merandi, who just won an NJCAA Division III Rawlings Gold Glove for his fielding prowess for the Schoolcraft baseball team. Here are a few basic tips on what it takes to become a flawless outfielder:

» **GET BEHIND IT:** Merandi said outfielders need to be in proper position. They shouldn't literally take shortcuts.

"For the outfield, the main tips are staying in front of the ball," Merandi said. "I think that's the biggest mistake a lot of people try to time it out, so they get right to the ball as it's coming down. Biggest key is to get behind it, it's a lot easier to move forward than it is to move backwards."

» **READ THE PLAY:** When the baseball leaves the bat, good outfielders quickly know whether to break toward the infield or drift back toward the fence.

"It's a little bit of anticipation," he said. "Being able to read the ball off the bat. The biggest thing is your first step. You want to make sure your first step is backwards, you open up quick. That's going to be your biggest help to get the ones deep."

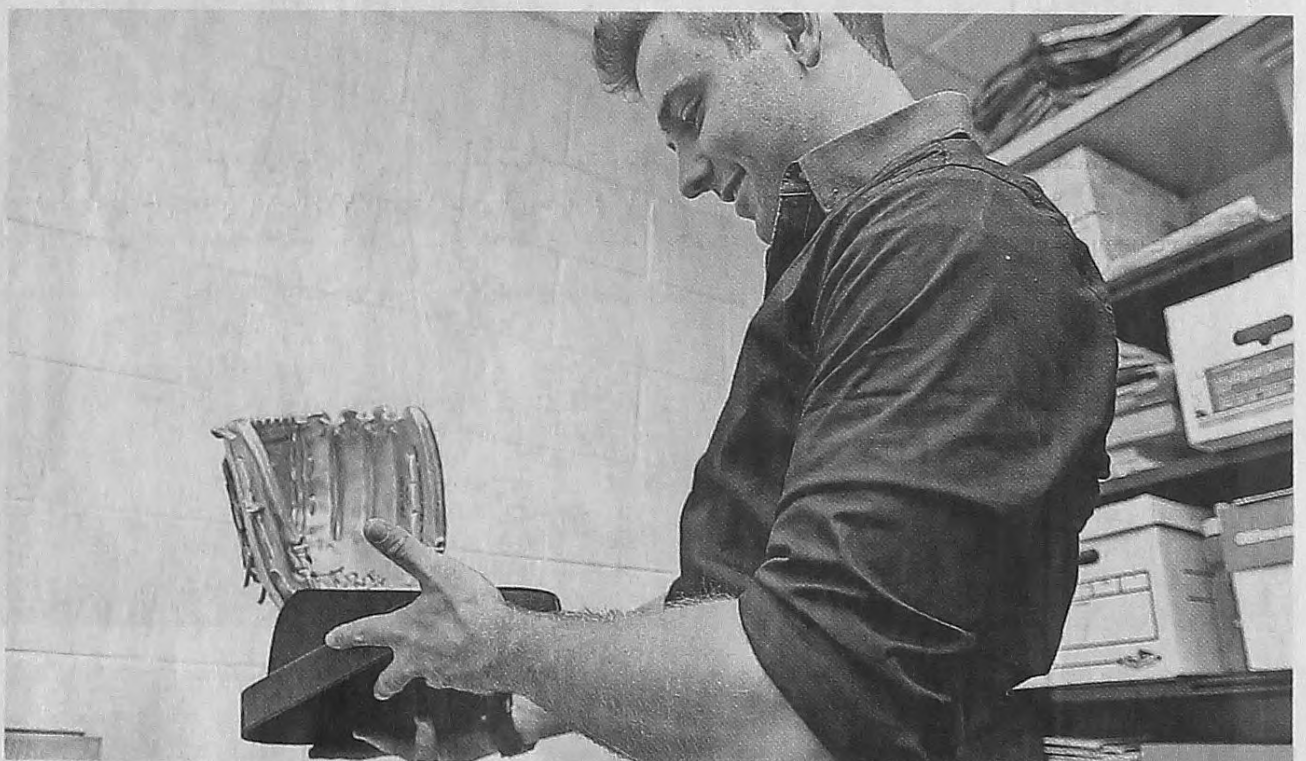
» **RELAY GOOD:** Hitting the relay man is an integral part of being an outfielder and Merandi said there is no easy formula — other than being a tireless worker in practice.

"Honestly, it's repetition and practice," he said. "Because you can do it, it's basically just your throwing skills. So if you're not practicing it, it'll be sloppy."

» **WORK ETHIC:** Although winning a Gold Glove is glamorous, the work that goes into raising one's proficiency to award worthy isn't. But Merandi underscored the importance of good, old, hard work.

"(It's about) practice, hard work," Merandi said. "On the field and off the field, in the gym. A lot of kids like to skip leg day. You can't skip leg day. You got to be quick; that's how you get explosive."

» **ON SECONDS THOUGHT:** "We (train with) Mercy Elite, they're really good at working with your explosiveness," Merandi said. "They always talk about it takes 0.2 seconds to change direction. That's what outfield is, being able to change direction or get yourself moving really quick."



Jared Merandi gets his first look at the Gold Glove trophy, which he won for being error-free in 2017 for Schoolcraft. He is an alum of Plymouth High School.

BILL BRESLER | HOMETOWNLIFE.COM

KLAA

Continued from Page B1

Howell, Hartland and Brighton.

KLAA president Nicole Carter, principal at Novi, confirmed the move Friday.

"We are pleased and excited to welcome Dearborn and Dearborn Fordson into the association," Carter said in a press release. "These are two schools with strong athletic and academic heritages that share our association's commitment to excellence."

Dearborn Superintendent Dr. Glenn Maleyko sent out a letter last week to inform the WWAC that both Fordson (2,762 students) and Dearborn (2,096) will be leaving while accepting the offer from the KLAA.

"Enrollment-wise, we're going to be more aligned with what we have," Fordson athletic director Jeff DelGiudice said. "We're all a little different, the three schools that are coming over. From a personal perspective, we're

locked into a division where we think we can compete. It was attractive to us, because we'll still be in with Belleville, Dearborn and the three Livonias. It, obviously, geographically fits. And with John Glenn and Wayne in there, too, I think it's a pretty good division. And it's a great league. The football is going to be fantastic. It will be good in every other sport, too."

Fordson, a perennial state playoff qualifier in football, proved to be dominant in the WWAC, followed by Dearborn and Belleville.

"It was a tough decision, only because I think for us it was a good league for us other than football," DelGiudice. "We were considered the big boy on the block for football. Other than Belleville and Dearborn, nobody wanted to play us in football at all. Because of that, it created a need for us to look elsewhere. From my perspective as a Fordson A.D., I think it's going to be great thing for our kids. Apart from athletics, their league is good about getting student council

kids together and doing more activities other than athletics."

The current moves were all precipitated by 10 schools leaving the KLAA following the 2016-17 school year, with nine of the 10 forming their own league this fall: Milford, White Lake Lakeland, South Lyon, South Lyon East, Waterford Kettering, Waterford Mott, Walled Lake Central, Walled Lake Northern and Walled Lake Western.

Another KLAA member, Pinckney, also jumped ship to join the Southeastern Conference.

Travel concerns, enrollment discrepancies and competitive balance within each of the leagues became some of the factors for schools to look elsewhere for new alignments.

"(Dearborn and Fordson) showed interest before school got out and we looked at their facilities," one KLAA school administrator said. "That will give us 16 teams and two divisions, which would be nice. Balance-wise and competitively, I think it's good. It hap-

pens to work out geographically. It will work out really good."

Grand Blanc, the KLAA's largest school (2,662), is in its final year in the league. Voted out of the KLAA last March, Grand Blanc is headed for the Saginaw Valley Athletic Association for 2018-19.

"Sixteen (schools) works out better than 14, eight and eight in a division," another KLAA school administrator said. "Dearborn and Fordson made a push and said, 'We'd love the KLAA, great competition.' They came to us and asked for consideration. We met last June and talked about it. We had another meeting on Aug. 1 and the principals voted on it unanimously to accept them. They had to give their league (WWAC) a year's notice. We decided we're not going to do anything in terms of seeding for football or sports. You're going to stay in your division just like they did for the KLAA for every single sport."

The two new divisions, yet to be named for 2018-19 in the KLAA,

fit geographically and enrollment-wise, for the most part.

"The only exception would be Fordson, but we said it wouldn't make sense to send Fordson and Hartland (2,052) to the other side," the KLAA administrator added. "It makes no sense for Hartland to travel all that way and Fordson the other way." DelGiudice added that Fordson and Dearborn explored getting into a football-only alliance with the Southeastern Conference, which includes the three Ann Arbor high schools, Saline, Temperance-Bedford and Monroe.

But the proposal fell through.

"If the football alliance had worked, I don't know if we'd be talking," the Fordson A.D. said. "There wouldn't have been that push to do something else, because we would have taken care of the major problem, which is football."

Meanwhile, the WWAC will be shrinking to eight schools. The largest school remaining is Dearborn Heights Crestwood (1,387), while

the smallest is Livonia Clarenceville (541).

The remaining six members include Garden City (1,107), Redford Thurston (1,103), Redford Union (925), Romulus (868), Dearborn Heights Annapolis (782) and Dearborn Heights Robichaud (682).

Another WWAC school, Dearborn Edsel Ford (1,411), will be joining the Downriver League in 2018-19.

"It was a good league for us in a lot of ways," DelGiudice said of the Western Wayne. "But the enrollment disparity was becoming an issue because there was us, Dearborn and Belleville (1,710) and then we had schools in the 600-700 range. Football drives things, especially when it comes to enrollment. A lot of sports, it's not a big deal because you're putting five basketball players out there, but with football, it's all about depth. With three schools having a lot bigger enrollments, it creates an issue."

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